

# Great Bell regains voice in Middlebury

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MIDDLEBURY — The town's Great Bell has regained its voice in its proper place.

With a crowd of 300-400 people craning their necks skyward, the historic 1,569-pound bell on Sunday was hoisted 40 feet high and gently maneuvered into a 5-foot by 7-foot opening of the Town Hall Theater's bell tower — a process that took about two hours — and rung for the first time in half a century.

The deep and melodious, full-throated sound of the bell — rung a dozen times or more — prompted cheers from the crowd and was answered by bells from neighboring churches.

"It was a terrific moment," said Town Hall Theater Executive Director Doug Anderson.

"We've been working toward this for such a long time," Anderson continued, remembering that he had first walked into the old theater in 1997 and had a dream that the building could be restored as the town's cultural center. "I was also just amazed and very heartened by the huge turnout. It was just thrilling that that many people had heard about the event and were excited about it, and stuck it out in the heat until the bell was rung."

The sound of the ringing bells, and the historic spectacle of putting the bell back in the tower, were a dramatic conclusion to an event that started with a few comments at the Sheldon Museum at noon on Sunday and was followed by a procession down Main Street, onto Merchants Row and up the slight hill to the old town hall.

The sounds of Dixieland jazz, played by Bud Leeds and his band, accompanied the historical comments offered by officials at the Sheldon Museum, including a brief recapping of the bell's history by local historian Glenn Andres.

## **THE BELL'S HISTORY**

Andres recounted how the town fathers had commissioned the Great Bell of Middlebury, as it was known at the time, from the well-known Clinton Meneely Bell Foundry of Troy, N.Y., for \$409.87. On it were inscribed the names of the town's officers: trustees A.J. Marshall, T.M. Chapman, L.P. Farnsworth, J.B. Benedict, P. Champagne, W.N. Chapman; selectmen George Hammond, W.W. Chapman, H.D. Maynard; and H.L. Sheldon, town clerk.

The bell was installed in the bell tower on Oct. 10, 1887, with the stated purpose, as Andres said, "to ring out town and national events, warn of fires, announce curfews."

Half a century later, town meetings moved to the municipal gym, built in 1938-9 with WPA funds, and the Town Hall became a movie theater. Town offices remained in the downstairs of the building until the 1950s, when the old high school burned and was replaced at its current site in 1957, and the old high school was reconstructed

as the municipal building. The town voted to sell the old town hall in 1959, at which time, Andres recalled, the “selectmen either had forgotten about their bell, or saw no use for it.”

In July 1960, Sam Emilo bought the building for \$13,900 and came across the bell during repairs. Having no use for it, as Andres reported, Emilo sold the bell in April 1961 to the Mintzer Brothers junk dealers in Rutland for \$225.

Word got out about the sale and suddenly, Andres told the crowd, “people took notice of their forgotten bell.” Arthur Healy, Theron Wolcott and others pressured Emilo to retrieve it, but the Mintzer Brothers maintained they had already sold the bell to out-of-state interests and wanted a “grander sum” if the community wanted it back. A campaign was initiated in town to repurchase the bell — “a buck for the bell” — and more than \$300 was raised, a sum that was matched by Emilo to fulfill the asking price.

On June 3, 1961, the Sheldon Museum celebrated the placement of the bell in the museum’s garden, mounted on an eight-foot cement block base. Thirty years later, in 1991, as part of the reworking of the gardens the bell was reset on a slab of marble donated by the Marble Works. During the time the bell sat on the museum’s grounds, a decision was made by the Sheldon board of directors to disable the clapper, as Andres recounted, “because students leaving the Alibi (a former neighborhood tavern) would ring it at all hours.”

In the meantime, in 1968, Emilo sold the former town hall building to the Knights of Columbus, which in turn sold the building to the Town Hall Theater in 2000 for the sum of \$275,000. As part of their multi-million-dollar effort to restore the building into a performing arts center, the theater corporation had restored the bell tower and belfry two years ago, as Andres said, “in the hopes of rehangng the historic bell for announcing performances and other town events.”

The corporation had the bell tower (along with the rest of the building) reroofed and recovered with slate shingles, and the inside of the belfry floor was covered with soldered copper sheets so that the bell could be exposed to the outside while the flooring and roof underneath was protected from the weather. As well, additional structural work was done to brace the tower to again hold the weight of the bell.

In negotiation with the theater, Andres told the crowd, the museum trustees “decided to transfer ownership of the bell to the theater (with the right of reversion) so it may regain its voice in the community.

“So what we have,” Andres concluded, “is the story of a bell saved for the town through the energies of one generation, curated for it through the energies of another, and now it will be rehng for public enjoyment and pride through the energies of a third.”

## **THE HANGING**

Following Andres’ remarks, a procession including a horse-drawn carriage carrying Leeds’ band playing their jazz, the bell in the back of a truck and several hundred people walking behind, proceeded the three blocks to the theater where the crowd reassembled as preparations were made to hang the bell. As a rugged terrain forklift with an extended boom moved into position, and dignitaries arrived to take their place in front of the theater, a few comments and thanks to significant donors were made by Anderson and Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., who had secured a grant of \$147,000. They praised the community for its efforts to restore the building and bring

arts to the center of town.

“Returning the Great Bell to its original home... after so many years of silence is a great symbol of the restoration of the Town Hall Theater,” Jeffords said. “Your hard work is paying off. It’s terrific to see the luster returned to this handsome, historic building, (and) it is particularly thrilling to witness the return of a vibrant community center where music and drama and culture are thriving.”

And then people waited, and waited.

The challenge for the construction crew was getting the 42-inch-tall bell, sitting on top of a pallet, and accounting for the width of the forklift tongs, through the 63-inch-high by 7-foot-wide opening — leaving the workers with just less than 6 inches, up and down, for error.

“I was sweating it for a little while, but it all went about as smoothly as one could have expected,” said Bread Loaf Corp. project manager Dutton Smith Jr., explaining that because they couldn’t do a rehearsal beforehand, there are always things that come up unexpectedly. Smith said their best plans were slightly upset by the bell’s framework and the frame on which it was to sit (as well as the positioning of the forklift’s tongs) by a mere inch, requiring a lengthy repositioning of the bell once inside the tower by site superintendent Ed Hanson and Bill Atherton, along with forklift operator Tim Gordon, who admitted to being “pretty nervous” as the bell was positioned into place.

“It took us about 45 minutes longer than we expected,” Smith said in retrospect, “but it was a lot of fun; probably the highlight of my career... The entire event was almost like a performance, and it was just great to be a small part of that whole experience.”

Once the bell was bolted onto supports in the belfry’s floor, and the rope was attached to the bell’s clapper, rigged through a pulley-system, the bell tolled... loud and long with a full, rich sound. And it tolled again and again, a dozen times or so, before bells throughout the town answered in reply.

“It was an overwhelming sound and moment,” Anderson recalled. “I was surprised by how emotional it was... For the Town Hall Theater it means we’re moving along in many important ways... For the town of Middlebury, it means many exciting things; here’s a project that’s bringing growth and excitement to the downtown for many decades to come. And that’s a very positive thing.”